

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	1
9	1. WHAT IS THE CIVIL SERVICE?	9
15	2. PAY AND PENSION	15
21	3. THE PROBLEM OF RECRUITMENT	21
26	4. THE POLITICAL PROBLEM	26
29	5. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY	29
45	6. THE POLITICAL MACHINE	45
52	7. GOVERNMENT AND THE PROGRESS OF THE SERVICE	52
61	8. THE SERVICE UNDER THE STUARTS	61
72	9. WILLIAM III	72
84	10. GEORGE III	84
97	11. THE SERVICE UNDER GEORGE III	97
99	12. CIVIL SERVICE UNDER GEORGE III	99
100	13. WORK IN THE CIVIL SERVICE	100
105	14. ETHICS	105
115	15. THE SERVICE IN WAR-TIME	115
121	16. THE CIVIL SERVICE AND CONTROL	121
129	17. THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SERVICE	129
140	18. THE FUTURE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE	140
148	19. THE FUTURE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE	148
152	APPENDICES	152

INTRODUCTION

IF I had set out in this book merely to present a factual study of the British Civil Service, it would have been unnecessary to go to the trouble of writing it; for that task has already been admirably performed by a number of eminently qualified writers. Its structure, its methods and the history of its development as an institution have all been exhaustively treated in a number of well written and well documented books. It would have been folly, therefore, to repeat what has been done so much better by others. But in all these books I have failed to discover any real recognition of something which from the very beginning seemed crystal clear to the present writer. That something was the fact that the Civil Service, far from being a cloistered institution far above the battle, with its own code, creed and traditions, was in the light of detailed examination nothing much more than the administrative arm of a state which had itself passed through a number of phases.

This is not necessarily a criticism of other writers on the service, most of whom have had no practical experience from the inside of the way in which the wheels of the state apparatus revolve.

It is, I think, a fair assumption that only a serving civil servant can be in a position to observe the modifications of that apparatus which have taken place because of the impact of economic and social changes. What I have set out to do, therefore, is to present a picture of the Civil Service, not as a solid British institution standing immovable and unchanging through all the changing pattern of history, but as a developing organism reflecting, in its structure, its conditions of service and its technique, the general flux and development which in succeeding phases has characterized the economic arrangements of our country.

There has been no deliberate attempt on my part to confirm this or that view of the state as a whole. The facts have been set down as I myself have seen them. Of some, I have had

INTRODUCTION

actual first-hand experience. All of them are capable of verification and to me they seem to lead to one inescapable conclusion that, on all the evidence so far available, the Civil Service as a whole has been unable to get very far away from the aims and purposes of the small minority which from time to time has controlled the destinies of our country. The changes which have taken place within it, and some of them have been drastic, have nevertheless been in the main only those adaptations which an evolving capitalism has demanded. When, for instance, nepotism and patronage gave way to open competition and a cleaner Civil Service, it represented a change forced upon the possessing class of the day by the requirements of an expanding industry and economy.

Nepotism inside the state apparatus was bad for capitalism—nepotism must go. At a much later stage, a measure of scientific research conducted under direct state auspices was found to be good for capitalism. Science arrived, therefore, on the Service scene, with results which I have tried to show in a chapter devoted to the subject. Today there is no more urgent question for British politics than the measure and quality of the control to be exercised over the operations of capitalism after the war, and, according to the way in which that question is answered, so again will the Civil Service be modified in its structure to meet the needs of the productive system. If that system remains predominantly capitalistic then to me it is clear that all its glaringly obvious defects will continue to find a place within the service. That inference can be drawn, not only from an investigation into the actual functions of the Civil Service but also from an examination of the conditions in which that function is performed. Whether we look at the role of the administrative civil servant, the position of the technical and professional classes or the work of the principal departments of state, we seem to arrive at a similar result. It can even be said that the excessive cautiousness which is said to characterize the average civil servant (whoever he may be), the lack of initiative and vision which is supposed again to hall-mark the administration, and the circumlocution which by popular belief leads to a slowing up

INTRODUCTION

of every departmental process are the inevitable accompaniments of a state service which cannot, if it would, disentangle itself from a productive system based on private profit.

Throughout the Service, thousands of public employees of every grade and class are beginning to see this—beginning to appreciate that the very qualities, the alleged lack of which the critics so much deplore, are stultified and often unrecognized in a Civil Service which does not, by its nature, truly serve the whole of the people. They do what they can to face up to their responsibilities, and throughout the war years particularly there has been a high record of devotion in department after department towards the general public which looks to them for guidance through the maze of wartime regulations and orders. In employment exchanges, public assistance centres, income tax offices and local food offices up and down the country, rank-and-file civil servants have been coming into closer contact with the public than ever before. The isolationist position of the state employee has become untenable and ancient prejudices, often deliberately inculcated, have been broken down. It will be impossible, I suggest, for anyone, for political or other reasons, to prevent that contact from becoming even more intimate, for civil servants themselves are sufferers from the system. The growing knowledge that they are in the long run nothing but the instruments of an elaborately disguised class domination, combined with the attempt on the part of heads of state to foster the idea that they are a class apart from those classes who more directly work for the capitalist system, is making the Civil Service a breeding ground for neurosis and every kind of frustration. Add to this the incontrovertible fact that hundreds of thousands of civil servants are, in normal circumstances, not very far away from the poverty line and we need look no further to explain the discontents with which the Service is rife.

There is another form of impoverishment too from which the rank-and-file civil servant suffers. Mentally, politically, one might also say in a special sense spiritually, every attempt has been made to stunt his growth towards adult consciousness. Cut off by the Trades Disputes Act from contact with

INTRODUCTION

the organized trade union movement, forbidden to take active part in controversial issues, told to regard himself as set apart for a function which presumably needs no knowledge of the outside world, is it any wonder that for many civil servants, the overcoming of a deliberately induced inertia has been a well-nigh superhuman task? Nevertheless, there is a leaven working within the state apparatus. There is a general recognition that the peoples everywhere are on the march and there is no desire on the part of large sections of the Civil Service to be out of step. Plans for a better Britain, they appreciate, rest not only on the defeat of the vested interests which will make every attempt to thwart them, but on the administrative ability and organizational enthusiasm with which they are handled by the appropriate departments. That in its turn can only be ensured by having a politically and socially conscious Civil Service anxious to play its part in post-war reconstruction, and willing to adapt its own structure for the purpose. In the final chapters of this book I have attempted to describe the nature of those adaptations and the probable social changes to which they must be related.

In one respect I feel bound to anticipate, and if possible disarm, criticism. The book is written with a quite definite bias. I am a socialist with convictions which a quarter of a century in the service of the state and an equal number of years in the Service trade union movement have served only to deepen. I am convinced therefore that only a socialist state can evolve a Civil Service freed from its present disabilities and defects, and equipped with the outlook and initiative necessary to tackle the constructive tasks which lie ahead. That lesson is being driven home to the civil servant in the light of his day-to-day experience. It is my fervent hope that this book will assist in the process.

R. W. R.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE CIVIL SERVICE?

IN order to get to know something about this great and growing entity, described all too loosely as the Civil Service, we shall do well to proceed at once to precise definition. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* can help us here and this is what it says:

The Civil Service is the name given to the aggregate of all the Public Servants or paid Civil Administrators and clerks of a State—the machinery by which the Executive through the various administrations carry on the central government of the country.

It will be observed that this definition omits from its scope all the armed forces of the crown, which since the close of the eighteenth century have been distinguished from all those other classes of state and public employees connected with administration and the carrying out of policy. The exclusion, however, of the local government official, the policeman and the teacher, is not quite so obvious except by reference to the words “central government” in the definition; but we can take it that although each of these classes is employed in a public capacity and paid from the public purse, they are not civil servants “within the meaning of the Act”.

It will be necessary, later, to discuss the reference in the definition to “the state”; for to this ambiguous term most of the rest is related. In seeking to define the function of the Civil Service and to trace its development through successive eras of social change, we may find a valuable clue in the nature and function of the state, of which it is both the instrument and the expression. We will return to this again.

We have described the Service as a “great and growing” entity—the term is no exaggeration.

Only one hundred and fifty years ago there were 16,267

THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE PEOPLE

public officials. By 1938 the numbers had risen to 400,000 non-industrial civil servants and another 200,000 industrials.

This distinction between industrial and non-industrial needs perhaps a word of explanation. By strict definition, the industrial employee of the state is excluded from the scope of the Civil Service. Nevertheless, he is an indispensable part of "the machinery by which the various administrations carry on the central government of the country". His appearance on the scene is, of course, the inevitable outcome of progressive industrialization elsewhere and the tremendous growth of those services, such as the postal, telegraph and telephone services for which the state has undertaken direct responsibility.

Early in 1943 the total non-industrial staff employed in the service of the state reached a figure of 678,000 and the industrial workers had risen in a similar proportion. State service has, in fact, become the biggest industry in the country and it is still growing. The greater number of those employed are concentrated in a dozen departments. The postal services account for something like a half, and War, Air, Admiralty, Supply, Labour, Information, Food, Aircraft Production, Revenue, Transport, most of the remainder. Of the 70 per cent increase in the non-industrial Civil Service between 1938 and 1943, 40 per cent are employed in the new ministries brought into existence by the war, and the other 30 per cent in the existing departments, the functions of which have expanded to meet the exigencies of a war situation. Of these latter, the Ministry of Labour, with a 50 per cent increase, the Service Departments, with a phenomenal rise in the neighbourhood of 300 per cent, and Revenue also with a 50 per cent increase, are illustrative of the general tendency. To those who, like Captain Balfour, regard civil servants as so many "state stooges" these increases may give rise to consternation and alarm; but when we examine them in relation to growth of work and function, what do we find? In the case, for instance, of the Revenue Department the 50 per cent increase of personnel has no relevance, apart from other important factors; the principal of which are the increase in the total number of taxpayers since the beginning of the war

WHAT IS THE CIVIL SERVICE

from four millions to twelve millions, the complexities introduced by wartime legislation and the untrained character of the additional staff. What is true of the revenue is equally true of the other departments where growth has occurred, and it leads to this conclusion—that those who object to the admission to the Civil Service of so many "thousands of bureaucratic rabble hurriedly collected by all the unnecessary ministries and departments"¹ must address their arguments not to the numbers involved, however astronomical, but to the social needs, if needs there be, which have called them to the service of the state.

Now let us see how these "bureaucrats" are employed. Percentage figures related to total personnel in 1938 are given, but the proportions are equally accurate today. Approximately .04 per cent (1 in 2,500) are employed in the administrative grades. These are the higher civil servants, "concerned with the formation of policy, co-ordinating and improving government machinery and with the control and administration of departments of public service".² The executive class accounts for 5 per cent. Their function is "the critical examination of cases of lesser importance not clearly within the scope of regulations, the direction of small blocks of business . . . and the responsible conduct of important operations".³ The clerical classes come next in the non-industrial hierarchy with 23 per cent. These fellows are supposed, in theory, "to perform the simpler clerical duties and to deal with cases in accordance with well defined regulations or general practice—and the collection of material upon which judgments can be formed".⁴ (In actual practice thousands of members of the clerical class not only collect material but use their judgment and act upon it.) The dividing line between executive and clerical, never very clearly drawn, is becoming, under the impact of wartime conditions, even more difficult to trace. Then there is a junior clerical class performing a number of routine and, again in wartime, not so routine

¹ Sir Ernest Benn, *Modern Government*.

² Report of Macdonell Commission on Civil Service.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE PEOPLE

operations. There are roughly $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent of them; and a shorthand and typing staff accounting for another 3 per cent. Porters and messengers furnish 6 per cent of the total, and technical, professional and inspectorial grades—of whom a lot more must be said—a further 6 per cent. We are left then only with the minor and manipulative grades, employed mainly in the postal services, and adding up to approximately 55 per cent of the service personnel.

I have excluded from these percentages the industrial civil servants, not because they are unimportant, far from it, but because their general conditions are governed to a large extent by the position with regard to similar categories employed in outside industry. In 1938, as I have said, there were more than 200,000 of them and their numbers have increased proportionately with the rest of the Service.

And *where* are all these people employed? There was a time when the term civil servant was equated with Whitehall. The whole of the state apparatus was popularly supposed to cluster and swarm within an area of a square mile or so. This, together with a number of other strongly held beliefs about the Civil Service, is a fallacy.

The social and economic developments of the last quarter of a century have gradually shifted the emphasis, until today most of the work of the state is performed in outstations geographically remote from London, S.W.1. The Revenue Department for instance radiates from Somerset House in every direction, and its work is done in over 1,200 district and collection offices. The exchange staff of the Ministry of Labour is just as widely scattered, and to take a more recent example, the Ministry of Food finds a home in almost every town, village and borough in the United Kingdom. In short, the wartime proliferation of departments in every direction, combined with evacuation to safe areas, has only served to hasten a development which was already far advanced. As a result, Whitehall is probably no longer the hub of the Civil Service universe. The Service has been forced, in fact, to follow the general trend of industrial development and to pitch its tent wherever the modifications of monopoly

WHAT IS THE CIVIL SERVICE

capitalism created a need for some form or another of state activity. It is also a factor, which in itself has made for big administrative difficulties, inseparable from the general problem of growth. Further to illustrate this point it is necessary to take only a short period of twenty years at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1899, the extension of elementary education saw the rise of the Board of Education. Prior to this there were the beginnings of an Education Department set up by an Order in Council in 1856 and followed in 1870 by the appointment of a paid head responsible to Parliament. These social changes brought about by a combination of public pressure and the need for a better educated proletariat created the equal need for a Civil Service within the educational field, to administer and organize the new development. The teachers, although remunerated in accordance with scales determined by national agreements, are not by definition, as we have seen, civil servants; but the distinction is largely academic and will tend to become more so. In 1908, again under public pressure, old age pensions were introduced and this was followed in 1909 and 1911 by the National Health and Unemployment Insurance Acts. In 1917 the Ministry of Labour was created, and in 1919 the Ministry of Health. This is not the place to argue the why and wherefore of social service legislation beyond the plain assertion that much of the expansion of the Civil Service during this short span arose directly out of a measure of social service which not even a strong individualist like Sir Ernest Benn would dare to suggest should be withdrawn.

Another point which should be made clear is that where some form of social service was conceded in response to organized social pressure, it was usually administered in such a way as to defeat the larger interests, to serve which the public pressure had been applied. To put it another way. The public knew what it wanted: whether its demand was for better working conditions, more education or an improved drainage system, but by the time the administration got to work upon them, it was the form rather than the substance which emerged. A generalized demand for education resulted, for instance,

THE CIVIL SERVICE AND THE PEOPLE

in the compulsory acquisition of the three R's to serve, not the interests of the people as a whole, but the very much narrower interests of a rising capitalistic class.

Later we shall argue that as with the social services conceded by capitalism, so it has been with those departments of state more directly concerned with the central government of the country. The Civil Service has, up to the present and through all the phases of its development, reflected very faithfully the needs of the class of which it has always been the instrument. But more of that in due season.